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### Deposited in DRO:

19 February 2019

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Shaw, Keith and Robinson, Fred (2018) 'Whatever happened to the North East? reflections on the end of regionalism in England.', *Local economy : the journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit.*, 33 (8). pp. 842-861.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094218819789>

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## Whatever happened to the North East? Reflections on the end of regionalism in England

Keith Shaw and Fred Robinson

### Abstract

Governance in the English regions has been undermined and weakened by recent structural changes. Although well established during the New Labour era, the regional level of governance in England did not survive the post-2010 process of institutional churn shaped by economic austerity and central government's aversion to the regional level. This has subsequently led to rescaling to the sub-regional level and the rise of devolution 'deals' involving new combined authorities with elected mayors. This article looks at the experience of North East England, where regional structures have been broken up and the region disempowered by such changes. It reviews what has happened to governance in the North East over the past 20 years and why the dismantling of regional governance matters. Whilst the region's *external* relationships with central government are problematic, it is also argued that governance problems *within* the region are no less important and need reforming. Longitudinal research indicates that organisations providing public services in the North East have continued to be characterised by inadequate accountability, unrepresentative governance and lack of transparency. The combined effects of the devolutionary consequences of Brexit and the ineffectiveness of small-scale 'devo-deal' interventions mean that the 'Regionalist case' in England will need to be refashioned and restated. The article concludes by considering the case for reintroducing regional-level governance and points to ways of bolstering the accountability and effectiveness of this level of sub-national governance.

## Introduction

Attempts to explain the patterns of contemporary sub-national restructuring across Europe are now emerging (see for example, Fricke, 2017). As Peck has argued, 'systematic austerity' is central to an understanding of recent approaches to devolved governance in which increased responsibilities are 'downloaded' to fiscally-constrained institutions of sub-national governance via a process of 'scalar dumping' (Peck, 2012, 647).

However, as a recent account of sub-national governance in Europe argues, such 'deterministic' interpretations of rescaling due to global economic forces also need to leave room for consideration of 'agency' at national and sub-national levels in which 'local beliefs, concepts, ideas, frames, narratives and knowledge' guide governance practices (Zimmerman and Geltis, 2017:206). Such a perspective serves to broaden the debate to encompass place-specific views on the nature of devolution, including issues of democracy and accountability.

In contributing to this wider international debate on the competing rationales for rescaling within sub-national governance, this article focuses on the case of devolution within England. This allows a focus on both the significance of austerity in producing a heavily centrally-directed neo-liberal approach to devolution and the continuing importance of national and sub-national characteristics in England reflecting: a centralised political culture; a more recent political aversion to administrative and political structures based on regions; and (despite this) the persistence of a more locally-generated spatial narrative in which regions still have meaning.

Here, we look at one region in detail - the North East of England. The North East is a particularly pertinent example of English regionalism – and hence contemporary rescaling – on account of its long history of regional-level economic initiatives (going back to the 1920s), its experiences as a state-managed (or 'policy-on') region and its long (and challenging) transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and society (Robinson, ed, 1988).

Drawing upon recent original research <sup>(1)</sup>, we examine what has happened to governance in the North East over the past 20 years or so, how it has happened, and why it matters. Our central argument is that a full understanding of the 'demise' of regions such as the North East requires a focus on where the region stands now in relation to its *external* relationship with central government and also, no less important, on governance problems *within* the region, including issues of representation, accountability and transparency. In short, we argue that it is of limited use superimposing new structures on an un-reformed and un-democratic local polity. In considering these twin dimensions of the regional problem in England, the article goes on to consider what should be done to ensure that the people of the North East are able to actively participate in shaping the future of their region. It concludes by considering the case - despite the recent flurry of devolution deals at the sub-regional level - for reintroducing some form of regional-level governance within England.

## The North East: rise and fall

We have spent many years observing, researching and commenting on the changing structures and processes of governance in the North East of England. We have witnessed shifting policy narratives: from ‘declining region’ to ‘Northern Powerhouse’, from ‘New Regionalism’ to ‘Localism’, from Regional Development Agencies to Local Enterprise Partnerships and from Unitary Councils to Combined Authorities. We have seen what has been described as the ‘historical pattern of institutional churn, disruption and discontinuity in the governance of England’ (Pike et al, 2016). Through all these twists and turns of policy our research has aimed to capture and interpret contested views on how the region *is* governed – and how it *should* be governed (Robinson and Shaw, 1994; Robinson, Shaw et al, 2000; Shaw and Robinson, 2011).

It has been interesting to watch organisations come and go, in a never-ending search for different – though not necessarily better - ways of doing things. It has also been frustrating to see opportunities missed, and, more recently, to see the North East region broken up, disempowered and increasingly ignored. Now, we may well be witnessing the end of the North East as a political-administrative scale of governance that has its origins in development organisations going back as far as the early 1930s (Cousins et al, 1974)

It seems hard to believe that, only twenty years ago, English regionalism was ascendant (Cabinet Office, 2002). In the North East, a classic region with a supposed coherent identity, the New Labour government’s new regional institutions seemed to be smoothly absorbed within the institutional landscape, building on a long history of regional policy intervention (Robinson, 2002). The creation of an elected regional assembly, rejected in a referendum in the North East in 2004, may have been a step too far, while the case for a new assembly was also substantially undersold by the Blair government, leaving the main proponent, John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, isolated (Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). However, the Regional Development Agency (One North East), the Government Office for the North East, and the North East Regional Assembly continued throughout the rest of the decade as part of what was a familiar landscape of governance (Shaw and Robinson, 2007).

But then regionalism unravelled; the Coalition government elected in 2010 had a particularly strong aversion to regional devolution (Conservative Party, 2009) and soon abolished the regional institutions, undermining efforts to think and operate strategically at a regional scale. ‘Localism’ was presented as the new fashion (House of Commons, 2011), but in practice, the rolling out of the ‘austerity’ agenda ensured that central direction from Westminster and Whitehall has become more dominant than ever. Reflecting on the 2011 Localism Act, Jones and Stewart argued that

‘The main barriers to the development of localism lie in central government itself and ...localism will not develop its potential unless there is fundamental change in the workings of central government. Those barriers are reflected and reinforced in the Act

because its development has been conditioned by the dominant centralist culture of central government with the result that the Bill could as well have been called the Centralism Act' (Jones and Stewart, 2011, p 1)

More recently, Hambleton has similarly noted that

'The central problem with the Government's approach to devolution in England is that it is not devolution at all. The Government is more interested in defusing blame for their misguided public spending cuts to local government than in empowering elected local authorities to make sound decisions on behalf of the citizens who elected them.' (Hambleton, 2017, p 6).

Commenting on 'Localism' in an earlier paper in *Local Economy* (in 2012), we argued that a pragmatic 'common sense regionalism' could still emerge in the North East and elsewhere, with, for example, the newly created sub-regional Local Enterprise Partnerships operating alongside region-level strategic co-ordination and also pan-regional bodies encompassing the wider north of England. We recognised there would be different geographies for different functions, determined, we hoped, by what made sense administratively and politically. It would be challenging, but, somehow, it would all work out:

'In the North East, making the most of localism while still maintaining, where appropriate, regional-level coordination and collaboration will not be easy to achieve – and may prove to be a test of the Government's commitment to localism' (Shaw and Robinson, 2012, p 247).

Looking back, we were far too optimistic. We did not foresee that governance at the sub-regional level would become more confused and confusing than ever. Thus, new combined authorities have been created through an asymmetrical and disorganised process (Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2016), with no coherent principles of devolution (Pike et al, 2016) led by a Government now paralysed by Brexit (ESRC, 2018). The former regional level has simply withered away.

What has become of the North East? It is evident that the North East today does not have a voice; it has virtually no power and little influence. The disintegration of regional structures of governance, combined with a centrally imposed austerity that has undermined local institutions, has left the 'region' with little energy or scope to speak for itself.

That is not all, however. *Within* the region, the institutions providing public services are largely unaccountable and lack transparency and many people feel that their views are not represented. Thus, the erosion of the region's traditional relationship with the centre is compounded by a persistent 'democratic deficit' within the region itself. We now turn to the first of these issues.

## Region and Centre

For the past century or more, the North East of England has been struggling with economic and social change. This region was once, truly, a 'powerhouse', at the vanguard of the world's first industrial revolution (McCord, 1979), and the loss of coal mining, iron and steel, shipbuilding and heavy engineering during the twentieth century was a painful experience.

The concept of the North East as a 'region' has long been bound-up with an understanding that this area (along with other former industrial areas) needed government support to manage economic change and development (The Barlow Report, 1940, Hudson, 1989 and 2005). Since the 1930s, the North East has benefitted from government regional interventions which have assisted the long transition to a post-industrial economy (Robinson, 1988, Cox, 2017).

Most would agree that it still does need support in the context of continuing and intensifying regional inequality - which remains a key feature of the UK's economic geography (Partington, 2018). However, the present government has been unable to tackle the main regional disparities, offering little more than rhetoric about the 'Northern Powerhouse'. Alongside this lack of effective government action, Brexit is likely to exacerbate spatial inequality because of reductions in regional aid (Bell, 2017) and differential impacts on economic growth (The Guardian, 2018). The loss of a policy focus on regions within England has come at the worst possible time.

The regional arrangements developed and embedded by the Blair Government were far from perfect but they did at least give the North East a voice, a bit of 'clout', and – perhaps most important—substantial spend that was directed towards regional priorities (Larkin, 2010). One North East, Government Office and the Regional Assembly together supported a measure of devolution to the region and, by the time these bodies were culled, they had gone some way to developing a more collaborative and integrated approach to economic and spatial planning (Elcock, 2014). In addition, the North East region was strongly represented at the centre. In 2000, Labour held power not just within the region but nationally too, and the Prime Minister and six members of Blair's Cabinet were North East MPs. The North East therefore not only had its own regional institutions, it was also at the heart of government.

Now, the situation is very different.

One of the most striking changes of recent years is the effective abolition of the North East as a recognised region – the area comprising Northumberland, Tyne & Wear, County Durham and Tees Valley (consisting of Darlington and the former County of Cleveland), an area that stretches from the Scottish border at Berwick upon Tweed to the fringes of the North York Moors, and from the Pennines in the west to the North Sea in the east, taking in the conurbations of Tyneside, Wearside and Teesside. This region is not just an administrative construct, nor only a topographical entity; it has a strong subjective identity (Fenwick, 2017)

which is widely understood in popular culture and discourse. People can say that is where they are from – even if this co-exists (often uneasily) alongside more localised signifiers of identity (Kelly, 2011) and is challenged by shifting boundaries and borders.

The ‘abolition’ of the North East followed the dismantling of the established regional institutions after 2010. The North East was initially split into two new Local Enterprise Partnerships: confusingly, the ‘North East’ LEP (only covering the northern part of the former North East region) and Tees Valley LEP (Shaw and Greenhalgh, 2010). The separation reflected and entrenched the tensions between the two sub regions centred on Newcastle in the north and Middlesbrough in the south, with the latter keen to be free of ‘rule’ from Newcastle after so many years (The Journal, 2010).

This fracturing of the region has continued apace under the ‘Devolution Deal’ process, in which the UK Government has invited groups of local authorities to come together and develop a ‘Combined Authority’ with a new elected mayor. Such Combined Authorities have, in practice, very limited functions but, under agreed Devolution Deals, some powers, budgets and responsibilities are passed down to them from central government (HoC, 2018). In the North East, the five Tees Valley councils were first to go through this process as the *Tees Valley Combined Authority* (Figure 1), soon to be joined - it was expected - by the seven-council *North of England Combined Authority*, (Sandford, 2017). The two Combined Authorities would therefore cover the same areas as the two LEPs.

However, as a result of political conflict, territorial antagonisms and arguments over the acceptance of an elected sub-regional mayor, three of the North of England Combined Authority (NECA) councils (Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland) split off and negotiated their own *North of Tyne ‘Devo-Deal’* (Figure 1). This now leaves the other four local authorities (Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland) as the remaining partners of NECA. The new link between NECA and the North of Tyne CA remains complex and confusing - with the remaining four councils having had to give their permission for the other three councils to leave NECCA. In addition, new joint arrangements to govern transport across the now-separate areas still have to be agreed (The Chronicle, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the creation of yet another Combined Authority north of the Tyne has met with criticism that the new area does not relate to any meaningful economic area; nor does it have any historical traditions. Thus, it has been argued that

‘There is a good chance that the North of Tyne deal will discredit the case for devolution, confusing the public, adding complexity to urban governance and delivering few noticeable material improvements. And, any gains which are achieved will be difficult to attribute to devolution because neighbouring local authority leaders will want to claim their share of credit’ (Tomaney, 2018).

Alongside such sub-regional developments are recent approaches at the *pan-regional level* (The Northern Powerhouse, Transport for the North) and across the *Anglo-Scottish Border* (The Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal).

**Figure 1: Combined Authorities in the North East**

**Tees Valley CA:** agreed October 2015 as Combined Authority with a new directly elected mayor. Deal includes devolved responsibility for a consolidated transport budget, as well as creation of a new Mayoral Development Corporation and leadership of a land commission to examine what publicly owned land and other key strategic sites should be vested in the development corporation. It also includes creation of a Tees Valley Investment Fund. Further components of the deal include control of a new £15 million a year funding allocation (over 30 years), a review and redesign of the education, skills and employment support system in the region and responsibility for a devolved approach to business support.

**North East CA:** NECA is a Combined Authority legally established in 2014 that has not agreed a Devolution Deal. In October 2015, NECA provisionally accepted a proposed devolution deal, subject to various issues being resolved. After months of discussion and negotiation, the councils reached a majority decision in October 2016 not to go ahead with the devolution deal. This partly reflects the internal splits and inter-authority competition between constituent councils and opposition to the requirement of having an elected mayor covering the seven council areas. It was also bound up with concerns about long term funding and the situation following Brexit. Three of the original seven councils have now agreed a new Devolution Deal - as 'North of Tyne' – and will need to develop new arrangements with NECA over transport. NECA remains as the co-ordinator of economic development.

**North of Tyne CA:** Combined Authority with directly elected mayor from May 2019. It will invest in projects to improve education, skills and to help people get into work. There will be control of the budget for adult education, powers to develop land for economic growth and regeneration, increasing the growth and productivity of rural communities and a joint committee to manage public transport (North Tyneside Council, 2018).

Such rescaling of economic governance in the North East can be viewed as offering new and flexible place-based approaches to development, creating a space for more creative approaches not possible under the old structures and geographies (Nurse, 2014; Shaw et al, 2014; Borderlands Proposition 2017). It might be said to foster a proactive approach, perhaps showing that 'local and regional actors are not passive, nor do they simply respond to the initiatives of the centre' (Pike and Tomaney, 2009, p 29).

In our view however, while this 'pick and mix' of sub-regional and pan-regional arrangements may provide opportunities for flexibility and creativity, it results in organisational fragmentation. This state of affairs will render strategic alignment and effective joint-working very challenging and result in a myriad of different organisations at local, sub-regional and pan-regional level each with overlapping responsibilities.



In particular, key aspects of post-Brexit development – such as rural policy – will see neighbouring rural areas, such as Northumberland and Durham, located in different Combined Authorities and also require a new approach to transport strategy across the Tyne and Wear conurbation. Nor will the new structures do anything to facilitate a coordinated approach to cross-Tyne planning in the emerging ‘twin city’ of ‘Newcastle-Gateshead’, particularly since the leader of Gateshead Council has strongly rejected the very principles of Devolution Deals -- now accepted by the leader of Newcastle Council (Public Sector Executive, 2018). Crucially, in the context of the need for a coherent and collaborative approach to post-Brexit planning, the new arrangements are potentially divisive and reflect how devolution deals are ultimately shaped by

‘..a theory of economic development that fosters inter-urban competition and economic concentration, tolerates and indeed even celebrates high levels of socio-economic inequality, is comfortable with some groups and places being losers and locks in enduring austerity, most especially in the places that have borne the brunt of public expenditure cuts to date’ (Tomaney, 2016, p 550).

Not only have the region-wide institutions gone; so has the North East’s voice. Put simply, the region has little chance of being heard. It is hard enough for a North East of 2.6 million people and only 29 MPs to make an impact in a highly centralised structure centred on London some 250 miles away. It is even harder for three Combined Authorities each to get a hearing, while the local authorities, battered by austerity, have almost no influence. It might be argued that the answer is larger pan-regional entities, but the Northern Powerhouse, and the Northern Way initiative before that (Goodchild and Hickman, 2006), have produced little, with the former more of a brand than a governance arrangement. The rise of the Powerhouse has merely served to highlight the geographically disadvantaged position of the North East - with the Northern Powerhouse inevitably focused on Manchester and the West Yorkshire conurbation, with the North East out on a limb (Lee, 2016).

In addition, the region now has little real presence in Parliament. Of the region’s 29 MPs, 26 are Labour, and therefore in Opposition. Only one of the region’s three Conservative MPs is a junior member of the Conservative Government. Moreover, nearly all the members of the current Cabinet represent affluent constituencies in the South East of England (Travis, 2018). Such is the marginal position of North East MPs that it sometimes seems that the best advocates for the region are a small number of former councillor leaders and Anglican Bishops now residing in the House of Lords.

Structures clearly matter. It is not enough to rely on a favourable conjunction of political forces in Westminster and in the North East. What the region needs is institutions with money, influence, commitment and democratic connection to the place. For now, though, regionalism is firmly off the political agenda and the North East is hollowed out, broken up and largely ignored. There is also, however, a connection between *structures* and *processes*

of regional governance. The fragmentation of governance bodies, their decline in status, the lack of coterminosity in organisational boundaries, and the labyrinthine nature of governance structures, leaves citizens confused and lacking any real understanding as to how decisions are made and where power lies. This in turn contributes to low levels of public engagement and support.

### **Governance within the North East**

We might justifiably complain about the North East being broken-up and ignored by the centre, but we also need to look closer to home and link such developments to the weaknesses in democracy and accountability within the region's governance. While the region is increasingly powerless in the national context, there is also - within the North East - a substantial democratic deficit. Things are 'done to' the region and, in turn, 'done to' its people.

Since the 1990s, we have been monitoring governance in the region, seeking answers to the question: 'Who runs the North East?' (Robinson and Shaw, 1994; Robinson, Shaw et al, 2000). We have focused on the governance of public services -- the services that we all pay for and which, we would argue, ought to be subject to a significant measure of democratic control.

Our latest research looks at both the elected and unelected 'state', covering over 100 organisations in central and local government; the European Parliament; pan-regional and sub-regional institutions; health services; education; the police and fire services; arts, culture and sport; and social housing (Robinson, Shaw and Regan, 2017). Our research does not cover all public bodies (for example, we have not included Parish Councils or school governors), but it does cover most of them. Together, these organisations have over 2000 elected and unelected members and spend over £12bn a year in the North East (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Institutions of North East Governance (as of May 2018)**

Parliament and Government	29 MPs; 3 MEPs
Local Government (12)	770 councillors
Combined Authorities (1)	7 Members
Joint Boards, Sub-regional and Pan-regional Governance (11)	167 Members
Local Enterprise Partnerships (2)	37 Members
NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (10)	139 members
NHS Foundation Trusts (11)	156 Members
Further Education Colleges (19)	277 Members
Universities (5)	109 Members
Police and Crime Commissioners and Police and Crime Panels (3)	43 Members
Arts Council England (North)	14 Members
Heritage Lottery Fund NE	7 Members
Housing Associations (9)	94 Members
County Sports Partnerships (4)	38 Members

Our longitudinal studies over the last 30 years have made it possible to identify change over time.

One key positive change in governance is the increase in women serving on councils and some boards in the North East. The increasing proportion of women is most apparent in the elected institutions, where the Labour Party's use of All-Women Shortlists for elections has made all the difference. In 2000, only four out of the 30 MPs representing the North East were women; today, 14 of the region's 29 MPs are women. In 2000, only 23% of North East councillors were women; now the figure is 43%. Some councils have seen a major shift: for example, in 2000, only 8% of councillors on Durham County Council were women; in 2018 that has increased to 43%.

The boards of some of the unelected organisations, such as NHS Trusts and university governing bodies, have also seen an increase in the representation of women – but female majorities on the region's organisations are still very rare indeed. The glass ceiling has not disappeared; rather, it has been ratcheted-up. Thus, 10 of the 12 council Leaders and 83% of the Leaders and Deputies men, and that, of course, in turn shapes the gender composition of those organisations that have senior councillors on their boards (Figure 3).

### Figure 3: Profile of Local Councillors in North East England

**Gender.** 43% of the councillors in the region in 2017 are women, up from just 23% in 2000. The North East has a much better gender balance than England as a whole. This shift is undoubtedly a reflection of the Labour Party's use of all-women shortlists in order to increase the numbers of women serving as councillors (and MPs) and, for local elections, reserving one seat per ward for women. As well as an increase in the numbers of women councillors, the gender balance of the executive has begun to improve, and in two council Cabinets (Gateshead and Newcastle) at least half of the portfolios are held by women. However, most of the very senior council leadership positions - Leaders, Elected Mayors, and their Deputies - are held by men (83%).

**Age.** Councillors continue to be older than the electorate, and are getting older. Nationally the average age of councillors has risen and this trend is reflected in the North East. In 1997, the average age of the region's councillors was 56 and in 2013 it was 60.3 (LGA, 2014). This is largely due to an increase in the over-65s (up from 25% of councillors in 1997 to 41% in 2013), including the over-70s who now make up nearly 20% of North East councillors.

**Ethnicity.** Almost all North East councillors are white. In the 12 councils in 2017, there are just 9 councillors from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (amounting to 1.3% of councillors in the region). Of the 12 councils, 7 have no councillors from BAME backgrounds at all. (For comparison, the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic population of the North East is 4.8%, although there is considerable variation between local authority areas).

**Disability, Health and Caring Responsibilities.** The North East has high levels of disability and long term health issues, and this is reflected in the characteristics of councillors. In 2013, the North East region had the highest percentage of councillors who have long-term illness, health problems and/or disabilities (LGA, 2014). 17% of councillors describe themselves as disabled or having life-limiting health issues, and this has increased slightly since 1997 (when it was 14%). Just over a quarter (27%) of North East councillors have caring responsibilities, which is about the same as the average for England.

**Employment.** Fewer councillors are in employment - and of those that are, they are much more likely to be in professional or managerial jobs than in manual jobs. There has been a decrease in councillors who are employed – whether full-time, part-time or self-employed. In the North East in 2013, 38% of councillors were in employment (compared with 44% of councillors in England as a whole). Of those North East councillors in employment, there has been a big drop over the last two decades in the percentage of councillors who are manual or craft workers (down from 22.9% to just 5.5%) and a corresponding increase in those who work in managerial, professional, and technical jobs or were employed in education - up from 62.6% in 1997 to 79.8% in 2013 (LGA, 2014). Half of the region's councillors are retired.

**Education.** More people with higher levels of education are becoming councillors. In the North East, the proportion of councillors whose highest qualification is degree level or equivalent has more than doubled – up from 24% in 1997, to 52% in 2013 (59% for England as a whole). In addition, the proportion of councillors with no qualifications has fallen in the North East from 28% in 1997 to just 8% in 2013.

Despite some improvements since 2000, men continue to dominate the appointed state. Almost all boards of unelected, or predominantly unelected, organisations have a male majority and examples of a female majority are rare. In the NHS, for example, only one out of 21 organisations (the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust) has more women than men on its board. Only one out of 19 Further Education Colleges (New College Durham) has a governing body consisting of more women than men (Robinson, Shaw and Regan, 2017). There are some very male-dominated boards, notably the Local Enterprise Partnerships (80% of board members on the two LEPs are men) and some Housing Associations (the board of the Gentoo Group is the most unbalanced in terms of gender, consisting of 12 men and 1 woman). Substantial male majorities on boards are still regarded as 'normal' in the North East and go unremarked and unchallenged. Sadly, the phrase 'pale, male and stale' still applies very well to the people who run the North East's public services.

### *Lack of Diversity*

While the gender composition has improved considerably amongst MPs and councillors, in most other respects the people who run the North East's public services are not much more representative of the region's population than they were 20 years ago. Very few people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (accounting for 5% of the region's population) are on councils or public sector boards. Only one of the region's 29 MPs has a BAME background. Seven of the 12 councils have no councillors from BAME backgrounds, and two of the region's five universities have no BAME governors.

Similarly, our surveys of the region's organisations have revealed that most NHS Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups have no disabled people on their boards – a quite remarkable situation, in view of their functions and responsibilities. Young people – even just people under the age of 45, let alone younger than that -- are almost absent from the region's governance. The average age of North East councillors has actually been increasing, and is now 60; many councillors are considerably older than that (20% are over 70). Only six of the region's MPs are under 45. In Further and Higher Education, the only younger people on

governing bodies are usually the Student Union representatives. 85% of the board members of housing associations, and 96% of the board members of NHS Trusts, are aged over 45.

What is also noticeable is how few of the decision-makers running the region are directly elected and can be voted out of office. Apart from MPs, local councillors and police and crime commissioners, many public services are run by people who are appointed, so there is little democratic input. Indeed, although members of the public seem not to have noticed, there has been a diminution in local democratic capacity as there are far fewer local politicians than there used to be (largely because district councils in Northumberland and County Durham have been abolished). The North East now has 12 councils led by 770 councillors – down from 25 councils and 1,279 councillors before 2009. In the appointed sector (such as the NHS) the boards of Clinical Commissioning Groups and Foundation Trusts are appointed, and that's also the case with the boards of FE colleges, universities, the bodies that invest public money in arts, heritage, culture and sport, and housing associations. Indeed, in many cases new board members are chosen (in secret) by the existing board members, who tend to select people in their own (rather narrow) image.

Looking at the profiles of politicians and non-executive board members it is very clear that oversight of the North East's public services is now largely done by people with professional and 'middle class' backgrounds. 'Pitmen politicians' – men who used to work in the region's coal mines have almost gone (along with the industry itself). Only two of the current 29 MPs had previously been employed in traditional manual jobs (both in coal mining) while 23 of them have had a university education and several have only ever worked in politics. In local government, 52% of the region's councillors have degrees and 80% of those who had not yet retired were in managerial and professional jobs (Figure 4 below).

### *'Managerialism'*

The various unelected bodies seem very inclined to appoint people with professional and business backgrounds (adding to the skills and experiences already represented by the executive members) rather than 'active citizens', 'lay people' or voices representing the locality. 'Experts' from financial and business services appear to be much in demand – perhaps because public services are run increasingly like private sector businesses and commercial success is emphasised. Many come from accountancy, financial services, Law, HR, PR, and property firms. The Universities are a case in point: they have many more governors who are employed in financial services than governors from BAME backgrounds or with disabilities. There is a plethora of lawyers, chartered accountants and business consultants, but often no one representing the interests of residents (such as councillors) or the workforce (such as trade union representatives). Organisations are liable to narrowly define who 'fits' on the board (and who doesn't). If they, through their search committees, always look for experienced private or public sector managers - or people in their own image - there is a danger of complacency, lack of challenge and 'Groupthink'. Moreover, the resulting exclusion

of other experiences and other points of view is likely to mean less critical debate, less creativity and poorer decision-making.

Put simply, the people who run the region are not representative of it and many people feel their voices are not heard. There is an evident democratic deficit stemming from the fact that many key public services – in health, education and housing – are run by unelected people who are not accountable to the public. The complex structures – and lack of accountability – in the health sector in particular, cause real frustrations for those member of the public wishing to challenge the closure of a hospital ward or local GP practice in their locality or shape their local Sustainability and Transformation Plan. According to one recent report,

‘Questions about accountability, and blame, remain unanswered. There is little public understanding of the structures in health services, which are often opaque and diffuse regarding who holds which powers and where accountability lies’ (British Academy, 2018, p 9).

Not surprising then, that many people feel alienated from the political process -- and consider that political or public bodies are neither accountable nor transparent (Figure 4).

One consequence of a stagnant local political system is that local election turnouts in the North East are generally low (in keeping with Local Government in England), averaging only about 35% in local elections. Recent experiments in extending the principle of direct election have not had much success. Turnouts for the election of the three Police and Crime Commissioners in the region ranged from 18% (the lowest in England) to 32% in 2016. In addition, only 21% of the electorate took part in the election of the new Mayor for the Tees Valley Combined Authority area in 2017, hardly a ringing vote of confidence in an area where there are likely to be real challenges in maintaining collaborative working in a context of political conflict between the Tory mayor and the 5 Labour council leaders. One overview is that

‘Where mayors have in effect been imposed...there are very low levels of public engagement with the post of mayor and a general lack of public enthusiasm. This is reflected in the average election turnout of 27.5% in the six mayoral elections of May 2017....it is clear that the requirement for elected mayors has aroused deep-seated negative reactions’ (Townsend, 2017, p 351).

Brexit has added further instability to the North East. The 2016 European Union Referendum highlighted many frustrations and tensions in the North East. Most people traditionally knew little about the EU and few (only 31%) voted in European Parliamentary elections in 2014. However, 69% voted in the Referendum -- and 58% of them voted to leave the EU. This, in a region that relies heavily on EU funding and exporting to the EU, can be interpreted as a real demonstration of alienation from Europe, London and the way things are done to the region and its people.

**Figure 4: Overview of key features of governance in North East England**

<b>Organisations (no.)</b>	<b>Governance</b>	<b>No of members</b>	<b>Males %</b>	<b>Females %</b>	<b>BAME %</b>	<b>Disabled %</b>	<b>Aged over 45 %</b>	<b>Paid?</b>
Parliament – House of Commons	Elected	29 MPs	52	48	3	N/A	86	Yes
European Parliament	Elected	3 MEPs	67	33	0	N/A	33	Yes
Councils – Local Authorities (12)	Elected	770	57*	43*	1	17**	89**	Yes
Local Enterprise Partnerships (2)	Appointed (+ Council Leaders)	35	80	20	6	0	N/A	No
NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (10)	Lay members are appointed (+ staff and GPs )	139	57	43	9	0	90	Yes
NHS Foundation Trusts (11)	Non-execs are appointed (+ staff on board)	156	63	37	4	<1	96	Yes
Further Education Colleges (19)	Most appointed	200+	63	37	3	2	80	No
Universities (5)	Most appointed	109	64	36	3	<1	N/A	No (with exceptions)
Police and Crime Commissioners (3)	Elected	3	67	33	0	N/A	100	Yes
Arts Council England (North)	Appointed	14	67	33	<1	<1	N/A	No (but Chair paid)
Heritage Lottery Fund NE	Appointed	7	57	43	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes
Housing Associations (9)***	Appointed (+ staff)	94	68	32	4	3	85	Yes

\* Data from authors' 2017 analysis. \*\* Data from Association's National Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013 (LGA, 2014). \*\*\* Data relates to the 9 largest Housing Associations in the North East

## Challenges – and Possibilities

We are not concerned about the loss of the North East because we are nostalgic – tapping in to that, ‘Structure of feeling about the past that is widely shared in the North East’ (Williamson, 1992, p 150). We fear for the region’s future, and what the demise of the regional scale across England will mean in practice. The end of the ‘North East’ - and English regionalism – matters.

Prospects for a renewal of the regional level of governance do not look good. The demise of regional structures since 2010, the rise of sub-regionalism and mayoral-led Combined Authorities, the lack of awareness of, and interest in, devolved bodies and the problems of representation and accountability suggest that further institutional changes are unlikely.

However, the question of how far powers repatriated from Brussels should be devolved down from the Centre has brought forth debates about the nature of the UK constitutional settlement in the context of greater powers for the devolved nations – including the continuing issue of Scottish independence (Syeda, 2017). This has also reignited interest in the governance of England, which has led to both calls for the creation of an English Parliament and – possibly more realistically – for a new federal solution (an Act of Union) that enshrines real powers and genuine resources at the sub-national level (CRG, 2016) and the replacement of the House of Lords with an elected Senate of the ‘Nations’ and ‘Regions’ (Reid and Dunleavy, 2015).

Such a new constitutional settlement for sub-national governance has also been taken up by the Local Government Association, who advocate: establishing a principle of subsidiarity, which would ensure that power is transferred to the level of government closest to the people; securing and enhancing the legal position of elected local authorities and; providing much greater fiscal autonomy for local government (LGA, 2016).

While the ‘Devolution Deals’ involving Combined Authorities and elected mayors are viewed by some as an effective strategic scale (Morphet, 2017), there are counter arguments that any new form of sub-national governance needs to be developed at a larger scale. England is too big, and our current city-regions and Combined Authorities are too small, to allow disadvantaged regions to compete effectively in a global economy (McCann, 2016). Partly, this is because smaller units lack the economic scale, devolved powers, and locally generated resources, and central government lacks the awareness and commitment required to tackle regional inequalities.

In addition, the ‘cluttered’ institutional environment at the sub-regional level does not lend itself to the development of a shared vision or a co-ordinated approach to multi-level governance (OECD, 2012). The ‘bonfire of the quangos’ promised by the then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron in 2010, has not led to any real decluttering because of the proliferation of new structures.



England is now one of the few European nations that lacks an effective regional or pan-regional scale of economic governance (apart from London). Hence,

‘...a return to some form of regional governance, if built around genuinely devolved powers and a re-imagination of cultural and historical identity, could play an increasingly important role in addressing both the economic and democratic deficits felt so sharply in many parts of the North’ (Cox, 2017).

Since Cox’s eventual solution - a more formal political focus on executive decision-making at the Northern Powerhouse level – is on a scale that still lacks substance, support or political credibility, it is unlikely that this pan-regional solution would provide the coherence or expertise formerly available at the level of the North East, North West or Yorkshire and Humberside regions. However, his suggestion that a democratic *Citizen’s Assembly for the North* is a part of the new settlement is interesting, and includes proposals for a deliberative forum, a bi-representative approach with an executive *Council for the North*, and selection through ‘sortition’ (Cox, 2017, pp 34-37). It is time to revisit the argument about directly-elected institutions at the regional level (Mason, 2017); the very limited proposals that clearly fell on deaf ears in the 2004 North East referendum could now be restated more vigorously and creatively in the context of post-Brexit constitutional reforms.

In terms of the North East region, a new federal solution could lead to both a decluttering of governance and strategies (the role of the two LEPs could be absorbed by new region-wide structures) and an appropriate rescaling of responsibilities where the regional level accrues repatriated powers from Brussels and powers from Whitehall. The reintegration of the seven councils within the original NECA structure and an initial concordat enabling the northern part of the North East to work with the Tees Valley CA could kick-start the move towards a stronger form of governance and strategic co-ordination at the regional level. Indeed, new opportunities for regional collaboration could emerge following Brexit: one recent report’s argument for a ‘renewed regionalism’ was based on the development of a sub-national approach to immigration policy (The Migration Observatory, 2017).

It is not surprising that the erosion of regional institutions, the weakening of a regional voice and the use of a devolution deal process - which places such a low value on accountability, and transparency - has further reinforced the deeply-rooted democratic deficit within the North East region. Thus, the necessary de-cluttering and simplification of the *structures* of sub-national governance needs to be accompanied by radical changes in the *processes* and patterns of governance within regions.

Alongside a new federal settlement that enshrines the powers and resources of new regional assemblies, we need to acknowledge that organisations within the North East region could do much more to strengthen and open up governance. It cannot be good for democracy or

for the quality of decision-making that the region is run by a narrow range of people not properly representative of those that they serve, a situation where 'ordinary citizens' are largely excluded from participating. It is not surprising that many people feel alienated from governance when the people who run things are from a narrow group: pale, stale, mainly male and, predominantly, middle class, and offering professional expertise drawn from a narrow range of skills in such areas as finance, accountancy, law and HR.

Drawing on examples from governance across the UK, an agenda for renewing and democratising English regional governance (including the North East) should therefore include:

- Offering more opportunities to directly-elect those who take key decisions. Apart from elected councils/mayors and elected Police and Crime Commissioners, voters across the North East have little or no direct control through the ballot box over decisions on services in Health, Education, and Housing for example. Being able to directly-elect a new regional assembly with devolved economic and social powers would be central here, as would effective plans for ensuring the wider engagement of stakeholders and civil society (Humphrey and Shaw, 2004).
- Using the Single Transferable Vote method of voting in sub-national elections in England (Terry, 2017). That would include employing a number of participatory and deliberative techniques to try and ensure wider involvement in decision-making beyond the 'usual suspects'. These could involve wider use of voting via 'digital democracy', citizens' juries or assemblies, and in relation to board appointments, the use of random or lottery selection.
- Ensuring that all organisations look critically at the diversity, or lack of it, on their boards. Policy documents and statements are not enough. Organisations need to monitor and review diversity and then take action to become inclusive and representative of different communities of identity and interest. They also need to consider what diversity means, how members and representatives from these communities can be specifically supported, and look at diversity in broader terms, for example in relation to sexuality, gender identity, membership of political parties, educational background and so on.
- The lack of people from BAME backgrounds and absence of disabled people on many boards is indefensible, and needs to be remedied. The chronic underrepresentation of younger people (especially on local councils) is also a major issue that needs to be tackled. The overrepresentation of middle class professionals and the underrepresentation of local people who use public services needs to be challenged and changed; diverse perspectives improve the quality of debate and decision-making (Lu Zhang, 2012).
- Ensuring that all vacancies for board members are advertised. Appointments should not be the sole preserve of search committees and the existing board members. As a matter of principle, all organisations should conduct as much of their business in

public as possible and actively invite the public and the media to attend their meetings.

- National Government and National Bodies should have a responsibility to promote diversity - both in terms of legally requiring organisations to provide regular data on the diversity of their boards and, in response, by establishing mechanisms to achieve fair representation (where appropriate, through affirmative action). There are already some useful examples of what can be done:
  - The Scottish Government is discussing national legislative action on ensuring a 50:50 gender split on public bodies (Scottish Government, 2017).
  - Recent research from The Fawcett Society (2017) on more inclusive local government recommends a number of changes including: term limits for councillors to aid turnover; reasonable adjustment policies for disabled councillors; allowing remote attendance at council meetings and using technology to support inclusion; introducing maternity, paternity and parental leave entitlements for councillors; adopting a requirement for gender balanced leadership; and permitting all-women shortlists for metro mayor elections.
  - In the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Mayor, Andy Burnham, has gained agreement that for all meetings of the GMCA both men and women should be represented from across the 10 local boroughs that make up Greater Manchester. Hence, appointed portfolio leaders have been asked to nominate assistant leads of a different gender to ensure balanced representation in meetings and around decision-making (GMCA, 2017).
- All organisations should take a critical look at what information they provide to the public and how they provide it – especially in relation to governance. There are websites that can serve as examples of better practice – and that give the impression of an organisation wanting to be open and transparent, and seeking to communicate effectively. Many councils, for example, publish huge amounts of information on their websites and make an effort to make websites clear and easy to navigate. At a minimum, all websites should have the following information about governance: profiles of the people on boards and declarations of their interests and remuneration; up-to-date minutes, agendas and papers for meetings; and information on how someone can become a board member.

In conclusion, we would argue that the combined effect of the devolutionary implications of Brexit, the asymmetries of devo-deals, the ineffectiveness of small-scale interventions and potential changes in the political complexion of the UK national government, will ensure that regionalism in England will re-emerge. The growing interest in a new federal settlement also recognises that the wider culture of centralism in the UK is ineffective, inefficient and unsustainable. In neoliberal forms of devolution ‘spatial scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested and restructured in terms of their extent, content, relative importance and interrelations’ (Swyngedouw, 2004, 33). Thus, irrespective of the dominant

narratives on rescaling (in favour of city or sub-regions), the devolutionary process within England is going to remain volatile, uncertain and likely to be influenced by local and regional pressures.

However, it is not enough to design new structures of governance, or encourage new forms of engagement if citizens simply do not understand - or identify - with the people or organisations that take the decisions that impact upon their daily lives. A key democratic imperative is to try to ensure that sub-national governance in England is more representative and accountable. English regions can only be renewed and revitalised if external changes go hand in hand with an internal process of democratic renewal – a holistic approach to shaping a regional tier that works.

## Footnote

1. The research project *'Who Runs the North East Now: Governance and Governing in an English region'* was undertaken in 2016-2017. It was funded principally by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust with additional support from The Institute for Local Government and Muckle LLP. The research adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods and examined the governance of over 100 organisations, with nearly 2000 members and spending over £12bn a year. Methods included the use of documentary sources, searches of websites and local news media, and a questionnaire survey of organisations, supplemented by follow-up enquiries. The authors are indebted to Sue Regan, who worked on the research project, to our colleagues Jonathan Blackie and Ian Zass-Ogilvie, and to the individuals in many organisations who responded to our surveys. The full report (and a shorter summary report is available on: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Who-Runs-the-North-East-Now-Main-Report-Oct-2017-FINAL-09-10-17-2.pdf>)

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